LUND UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND MANAGEMENT

Department of Business administration

Course code: FEKH49

Title of the course: Bachelor Degree Project in Organization

Semester: Spring 2022

Towards the top - But what is the climb like?

– A qualitative study on employees perceptions of their career ladders and the forms of normative control that are exerted

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Abstract

Title: Towards the top - But what is the climb like?

Seminar date: June 2, 2022

Course: FEKH49, Bachelor Degree Project in Organization, 15 hp

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Five Keywords: Career Ladder, Organizational Control, Professional Service Firms, Normative Control, Aspirational Control

Research Question: How do employees in professional service firms perceive the climb to the top of their organizational career ladders?

Purpose: The purpose of the thesis is to contribute to the comprehension of how employees in professional service firms perceive their climb of the career ladder through promotions and to additionally provide further understanding of how the structure can have positive and negative effects for the organizations. Furthermore, we intend to contribute theoretically to how the career ladder could function as a system that exerts *Aspirational control*.

Methodology: The study has had a social constructionist standpoint with an abductive method to enable the thesis to answer the research question and purpose. The thesis is a qualitative study, and has conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with employees from three different companies.

Theoretical Perspective: The literature review presents previous research on organizational control, followed by a presentation of how HRM systems can be channels for control and also includes a presentation of incentive theory in relation to the principal-agent relationship. This is followed by a presentation of normative control theories including, Identity regulation, and Aspirational control.

Empirical Foundation: The thesis empirical analysis presents how the employees interpret the climb of the organizational career ladder and how the structure of the career ladder exerts forms of normative control.

Conclusion: Forms of normative control such as identity regulation and aspirational control are exerted by career ladders, it can provide positive effects by linking the companies and the employees desire but can have negative effects if the structure of the career ladder is not communicated thoroughly.

Sammanfattning

Examensarbetets titel: Mot toppen - Men hur är egentligen bestigningen?

Seminariedatum: 2 juni, 2022

Kurs: FEKH49, Examensarbete i organisation på kandidatnivå 15 hp.

Författare: Antonia Dembek, Felix Ellqvist och Premton Krasniqi

Handledare: Nadja Sörgärde

Fem nyckelord: Karriärtrappan, Styrning, Professional Service Firms, Normativ styrning, Aspirationell styrning

Forskningsfråga: Hur uppfattar anställda i Professional Service Firms bestigningen till toppen av deras organisationella karriärstrappor?

Syfte: Studien syftar till att bidra med förståelse för hur anställda i Professional Service Firms upplever bestigningen av karriärstrappan genom befordringar. Vidare ämnar den att ge ytterliggare förståelse för hur trappans struktur kan ha positiva och negativa effekter för bolaget. Vidare, ämnar vi att bidra teoretiskt till hur karriärtrappan kan agera som en form av *Aspirationell styrning.*

Metod: Studien har haft en socialkonstruktionistisk utgångspunkt och har haft en abduktiv ansats för att kunna möjliggöra svar på uppsatsens frågeställning och syfte. Uppsatsen är en kvalitativ studie och har gjorts med 10 semistrukturerade intervjuer med anställda från tre olika företag.

Teoretiska perspektiv: Litteraturgenomgången presenterar tidigare forskning på styrning i organisationer, vilket följs av en presentation av hur HRM system kan användas som styrningskanaler, vilket inkluderar en presentation av incitamentsteori i relation till principal-agent förhållandet. Därefter följer en presentation av normativ styrning, inklusive identitetsreglering och aspirationell styrning.

Empiri: Studiens empiriska analys presenterar hur de anställda upplever bestigningen av företagets karriärtrappa och hur karriärtrappans struktur utövar former av normativ styrning.

Slutsats: Former av normativ styrning såsom identitetsreglering och aspirationell styrning utövas av karriärstrappan och kan ge positiva effekter genom att sammankoppla företagen och de anställdas önskemål, men kan även ha negativa effekter om karriärtrappans struktur inte kommuniceras ordentligt.

Acknowledgements

Dear reader,

Writing our bachelor's thesis has been a rewarding process where we have gone through trials and tribulations to produce the paper. It has been interesting and fruitful to conduct the research in a field which has not been touched by many.

We want to extend our sincerest thanks to our supervisor Nadja Sörgärde. You have through your kindness and involvement motivated us more than you know. Our fruitful discussions together and your razor-sharp observations have helped us take our findings to the next level. Thank you!

We also want to thank all of you who in one way or another have helped and motivated us during this process. It really meant a lot to us.

We wish you a pleasant reading!

Antonia Dembek, Felix Ellqvist & Premton Krasniqi

May 31, 2022

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1. Introduction

The thesis aims to study how employees' perceive the climb of well-structured career ladders at professional service firms. The study will in depth investigate the influencing factors which employees describe as reasons for and against wanting to get promoted. The chapter is divided in a background which provides an insight into career ladders at professional service firms, followed by a problematization presenting a general literature review on organizational control together with the research gap the thesis aims to contribute to. This is followed by a purpose and research question and continues to present the study object and a thesis overview.

1.1 Background

Observing the managerial structure of companies and organizations around the world today, suggests a current shared desire for promotions and career advancements. The subject of this thesis is the organizational career ladder, more specifically with a focus on investigating how control can be exercised through the career ladder in professional service firms (henceforth referred to as "PSF"). Career ladders can be found in every large organization in the world, having a profound effect on organizations and being an imperative part in the career advancement process (Huang & Zhang, 2007). A career ladder can influence employees through its different designs of the structure and by including activities such as reward systems, employee performances could for instance be controlled and improved (Clark, 2005). The career ladder is accentuated as the foundation for career management and the previous research underscores the extensive effects the career ladder can have on employees' career paths, including influencing the employees self-cognition, growth, and promotion management (Huang & Zhang, 2007; Souza, 2002).

Career ladders in PSF's provide an interesting study angle, as these companies are characterized by having clear and detailed organizational career ladders and are described to be career driven (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2003; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). The PSF companies have during the last years grown and expanded, adapting to new demands and standards by utilizing their knowledge intensive workforce, creating a necessity for comprehensive control systems (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004). Considering the growth of PSF and the presence of their career ladders, it is interesting to set the perspectives of those who these structures are intended for, namely employees, in a context where it can be better understood what intentional and unintentional effects these ladders have. Studies emphasize how career ladders have the power to influence (Hedge & Rineer, 2017; Huang & Zhang, 2007), and in this study, we will further study how the career ladders in PSF influence and steer employees career desires and aspirations.

1.2 Problematization

Organizational control practices have been present for decades and taken shape in different forms. While forms of direct, output based and normative control have been covered in previous research and literature and set in relation to vertical or horizontal relations in organizations (e.g. Weber 1946; Landes 1986; Mintzberg 1989; Barker 1993; Ouchi & Maguire, 1975; Rennstam, 2017; Johnson & Gill, 1993; Stewart, Courtright & Barrick, 2012), surprisingly little has been in relation to career ladders in PSF.

The PSF's organizational structure provides a dynamic environment that enables observations of several control perspectives (Covaleski, Dirsmith, Heian & Samuel, 1998; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Costas & Kärreman, 2013; Bévort & Poulfelt, 2015), where studies also accentuate how control perspectives used by PSF have adapted to the changing trends within organizational control (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004; Alvehus, 2018). Several studies have in the last two decades been conducted on forms of control in organizations that are characterized as PSF's. Control in PSF has for instance been studied from the perspective of culture (Robertson & Swan, 2003), and trust (Weibel, Den Hartog, Gillespie, Searle, Six & Skinner, 2016). Closest to our own study have been the influential works in relation to identity, identity regulation and socio-ideological control (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004; Alvesson & Kärreman 2004; Covaleski, Dirsmith, Heian & Samuel, 1998; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007), and have been from a managerial control perspective.

The reason for this is that these organizations, despite the requirement for autonomy and control, are generally seen as career companies where career ladders have a deep-rooted function in the organizations. Although some knowledge of the function of the career ladder in organizations is present, we still do not know much about how it can be used to exert control, thus making it rather mysterious. As surprisingly little research has been done in PSF where the traditional career ladder is deeply rooted in the organization and how aspirational control can be exerted through the traditional career ladder, we aim in this paper to contribute to the existing research on control in PSF as well as the limited amount of research that exists in the area of aspirational control.

1.3 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of the thesis is to contribute to the comprehension of how employees in professional service firms interpret their climb of the career ladder through promotions and to additionally provide further understanding of how the structure can have positive and negative effects for the organizations. Furthermore, we intend to contribute theoretically to how the career ladder could function as a system that exerts aspirational control. To enable the thesis to achieve said purpose, the following research question has been formulated:

How do employees in professional service firms perceive the climb to the top of their organizational career ladders?

1.4 Study Object

This study investigates three of the largest professional service firms in the world, all three of them have many years of experience in the industry and are considered to be world leaders in the market. The study investigated the Swedish enterprises of the companies which had a combined yearly revenue 2021 of 10.5 billions Sek. The three companies share many common features, such as being of similar size and offering services in different business areas, including audit and accounting, advisory and consulting, and tax, risk and legal services. Another key common denominator shared by the companies, are the detailed and clear traditional career ladder, which are deeply rooted in the companies structure. The clearly described career ladder goes from starting as an associate, assistant, or consultant to being promoted to senior associate, assistant, or consultant. The employee then continues to be promoted if he or she continues to perform sufficiently well, to roles such as manager, senior manager, director and finally Partner. These promotions are a natural part of the business, with each new step adding more responsibility and more areas of responsibility. The study obtains perspectives from all levels of the career ladder with a limitation to employees operating and working in Sweden. The employees studied, work in different business areas of the organization but what they have in common is that they all have or will climb within the company. The companies therefore proved to be a relevant object of study for an analysis where the employees' experiences of the climb to the top of their organizational career ladder, is in focus. An empirical study of the employees perception of the career ladder within these three companies will therefore provide an insight into the complexities and problems associated with the climb to the top of their organizational career ladder.

1.5 Thesis Overview

The thesis is organized in six main chapters, namely, *Introduction*, *Theoretical framework*, *Methodology*, *Empirical Findings* and *Analysis*, *Discussion,* and lastly *Conclusion*, excluding *Reference list*. The aim of the introductory chapter is to generate interest in the topic by explaining its relevance and importance in today's society. It also presents the purpose of the study, the questions this thesis actually intends to answer and the choice of the study object. This is followed by the theoretical framework of the paper, which aims to provide a reflective stance on the relevant theories that will be applied to the collected empirical data. Addressed there are the key theories and concepts such as *Organizational control, HRM and control, Incentive Theory and the Principal-Agent Relationship, Normative Control, Identity Regulation, Aspirational Control* and a *Research gap*. The third part, the method chapter, aims to explain how the study was conducted with the subheadings *Qualitative Research Strategy, Abductive Approach, Collection Process, Analysis Process* and *Quality Assessment*, which clarify each component of the paper. The empirical data, which is the fourth part of the paper, presents the data collected from the interviewees which later is analyzed in the fifth part of the paper, analysis and discussion. The empirical findings and analysis chapter is divided into five different sections, where section 4.1-4.4 presents how the interviewees are influenced by control and 4.5 presents how the control loses influence. In the discussion chapter, these experiences will be analyzed based on the theoretical framework and discussed. Finally, the conclusions of the study will be presented in the conclusion chapter where the results of the study are highlighted and suggestions for further research are given.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this chapter we will present previous research on how organizational control can be exercised. Section 2.1 presents a general introductory background for control, followed by 2.2 which clarifies how HRM systems can be channels for control that also includes a presentation of incentive theory in relation to the principal-agent relationship. Furthermore 2.3 consists of normative theories including, Identity regulation, and Aspirational control. Lastly in 2.4 the research gap presented.

2.1 Organizational control

According to Barker (1993), the essence of control for organizations is for its members to implement strategies that will control the activities so that it suits the organization's goals and purpose. Organizational control (henceforth referred to as "control"), can therefore be understood as the organizational attempt to coordinate individuals understanding of what to do and how to do it, to achieve these goals and purposes (Barker 1993; Johnson & Gill, 1993; Stewart, Courtright & Barrick, 2012). Previous literature on the field of control has argued that managers are highly associated with exercising the control in organizations (Mintzberg 1989; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004; Kärreman & Alvesson 2004; Tengblad 2001). Typical for management control is that managers specify, monitor, and evaluate both individual and collective action, and that they focus on worker behavior, output and the minds of employees (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004). This form of vertical control where managers, or other superiors higher up in the vertical hierarchy, exert their power over their subordinates has been diligently covered in the control literature (Weber 1946; Landes 1986; Mintzberg 1989). However, Rennstam (2017) points out that although this way of viewing control is the most common, control could also be exerted by colleagues. The interest for such forms of horizontal control has in recent years become increasingly studied and thus garnered literature to the field of control (Barker, 1993; Rennstam, 2007; Lee & Edmondson, 2017).

Methods of control are commonly categorized as behavioral, output based and normative forms of control (Kärreman & Rennstam, 2019). Behavioral forms of control are characterized by the organizational attempts to design and oversee working procedures (Kärreman & Rennstam, 2019). The aim is to control the behavior of the employee (Rennstam, 2017), and for it to work, Ouchi and Maguire (1975) argue that appropriate instructions must be given to employees on how to execute their tasks. Contrastingly, output based forms of control allow for a variety of behaviors so long as the desired output has been achieved (Rennstam, 2017). Kärreman & Rennstam (2019) emphasize that although this form of control oftentimes is considered more progressive than behavioral control, the need to reach desired output might come at the expense of freedom, since this form of control indirectly is a form of behavioral control. Normative control is also an indirect form of behavioral control since the end goal is to affect the behavior of the employee (Kärreman & Rennstam, 2019). While normative control will be discussed more in-depth further down in 2.3.1, this form of control can briefly be described as the aim to control employees' thoughts, feelings and underlying values (Kunda, 1992; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004). With foundation in organizational control, an understanding of how to control PSF's most vital resource, the employees, are presented. The importance of the employees in PSF's directs us to further understand the role of human resource management practices for control.

2.2 HRM and control

A broad definition of Human Resource Management (henceforth abbreviated HRM) practices is that it includes and concerns everything that is associated with managing employee relations within the organization (Boxall & Purcell, 2000). This includes for instance the recruitment, development and career planning of employees (Steffy & Grimes, 1992). According to Paauwe (2004), much of the interest garnered for HRM can be traced back and be accredited to the influential work by Huselid's paper on how HRM practices affect organizational performance. Huselid (1995) claims that high performance work practices, a form of HRM practice, affect employee performance positively, and thus also reflects positively on the organizational performance and profitability. Huselid (1995) further argues that HRM practices have the power to affect the skills of employees, and therein strengthen the human capital in an organization, by recruiting and selecting skilled workers, and through the coaching and mentoring of all within the organization. Since the competence and skill of the employees is the main resource within PSF's (Löwendahl, 1997), HRM practices become pivotal for these organizations to maintain their competitive edge.

Due to HRM practices having a positive effect on organizational performance, the strategies which organizations implement, play a key part in achieving the improved performance. Strategic Human Resource Management (henceforth abbreviated SHRM) are the strategic choices related to how the workforce is best managed to reach the organizational goals (Boxall & Purcell, 2000). Two such strategies are that of either, implementing a "hard HRM" approach centered around control or a "soft HRM" approach centered around commitment (Arthur, 1994; Watson, 2004; Hauff, Alewell & Hansen, 2014). Whereas the former strategy focuses on employee compliance by implementing rules and procedures for the work process where the employee is closely supervised and monitored (Arthur 1994; Eisenhardt, 1985; Watson, 2004), the latter strategy focuses on intertwining the employee's goals with the organization's goals by creating an intimate relationship between the two, and on strengthening employee autonomy in task execution (Arthur, 1994; Watson, 2004). However, although the commitment approach to HRM is framed in a more positive light (Huselid, 1995; Arthur, 1994), researchers have challenged the notion of one strategy being better than the other (Boxall & Purcell 2000; Hauff, Alewell & Hansen, 2014).

Furthermore, criticism has also been directed towards how these strategies are portrayed. While Arthur (1994) has argued that more commitment shown by employees in turn lessens the need for control, Hales (2002) has criticized the literature for misjudging the managerial desire to continue supervising employees since the managers are the ones held responsible for employee performance. Additionally, well-implemented control systems have the potential to cultivate employee trust since these can indicate predictability, fairness and reliability in the organization (Weibel et al. 2016). Also, PSF's are complex to manage considering the conflicting demands for autonomy and control which are simultaneously present in the organization (Löwendahl (1997).

Nevertheless, choosing a suitable strategy is imperative for the PSF to reach desired goals. Thus, due to the strategies chosen to reach the desired goals being heavily dependent on employee performance, ensuring appropriate and effective performance is crucial to execute strategy and reach these goals. Performance management, a HRM practice concerned with ensuring desired performance, aims to implement activities such as reward systems where employee performances for instance can be controlled and improved (Clark, 2005). Huselid (1995) also accentuates that reward systems such as incentive compensation systems and internal promotion systems are imperative HRM practices for employees to perform better. The reward systems proposed for the employees by Huselid (1995), provides both a driving inducement for achieving set organizational goals and provides a platform for the employee and organization to steer towards intended direction, incentivising further understanding of incentives role and the principal-agent relationship.

2.2.1 Incentive theory and the principal-agent relationship

According to Eisenhardt (1985, p.136), "agency theory considers the optimal contract form for that ubiquitous control relationship in which one person, the principal, delegates work to another, the agent". Incentive questions stem from the problem that occurs when a principal delegates tasks to an agent who has another objective than the principals, and where the latter has imperfect information regarding the former (Laffont & Martimort 2002; Besanko, Dranove, Shanley & Schaefer, 2017). The principal-agent relationship is defined as a contractual relationship where the principal hires an agent to perform certain tasks on the principal's behalf, with some decision-making authority that inevitably will affect the principal (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). One such relationship is that of a publicly traded company's shareholders, the principal(s), and the company CEO, the agent, but could also be the relationship between professionals and their clients, and more (Besanko et al. 2017). One reason why an agent is likely to have a different objective than the principal is due to both parties desiring to maximize their respective outcomes, and when both are utility maximizers the agent might not act in the best interest of the principal (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Whereas the principal desires to maximize the value it can receive from their agent, the agent is more inclined towards what is important to them (Besanko et al. 2017). What might be more important from a managerial agent perspective could be the limiting of personal risk and thus not executing risky strategic initiatives that the principal finds reasonable (Besanko et al. 2017), or wanting to reinvest profits into new projects instead of paying out dividends to shareholders (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2019). When taking this relationship into account, it becomes apparent that there somehow needs to be a way in which the objectives of both parties align with one another, and it is here that incentives come into play.

Barnard (1968) accentuates that it is crucial for organizations to have personnel that want to contribute with their individual talents to the organization, or as he calls it the cooperative system. He further claims that the individuals are the basic strategic factors within the organization and that therefore incentives must be in place to organize these individuals towards wanting to contribute. Hence, by not having adequate incentives in place, he concludes that it would lead to dissolution, or change in organizational purpose, or even worse, the complete failure of the cooperative system. Although this line of reasoning appears intuitively plausible, the organization still needs to understand its personnel's needs to establish adequate incentives. Barnard (1968) points out that this can be achieved by understanding the connection between net satisfaction and net advantage. He claims that the employee's will to contribute is an effect of the satisfaction felt which correlates to the difference of advantages minus disadvantages in relation to the contribution. Thus, Barnard (1968) states that an adequate and effective incentive is either one that is positive and therein raises advantages, or one that eliminates negative incentives such as disadvantages. Understanding employees is therefore of importance, indicating a means to further comprehend thoughts, feelings and underlying values which normative control accentuates.

2.3 Normative Control

2.3.1 Normative control in general

As was previously mentioned, normative forms of control aim to guide employees actions by attempting to control their thoughts, feelings and underlying values (Kunda, 1992; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004). By doing so, employees' behavior will be shaped to benefit organizational effectiveness (Kärreman & Rennstam, 2019). This means, in other words, that effectiveness can be achieved through the normative community in which employees think and act in desirable ways without either being told directly what to do or having to measure performance (Rennstam, 2017). Although this can be created in different ways, a successful method is the commonly used model of recruitment called the matching model which assumes that the candidates hired should not only possess the right qualifications but also the right characteristics such as personality, values, norms, attitudes and goals that match those of the organization (Kärreman & Rennstam, 2019). The authors argue that the point of this is to identify candidates who accept the realistic picture of what it is like to work at the organization that is painted for them in order to see if they are the right candidate who matches the demanding truth of working at the organization. However, employees are always undergoing training, as another method of normative management is socialization, which involves introducing employees to the norms of the organization (Kärreman & Rennstam, 2019). The authors explain that this can take place both in the form of induction courses or further training, but also during normal working hours, in fact in any situation where the explicit or the unspoken codes regulate work.

Thus, recruiting employees who are considered appropriate for the organization and further training them in the ways of the organization enables managers to exert socio-ideological control, a form of normative control (Rennstam, 2017). Besides the managerial attempts to control one's sense of self, socio-ideological control can be used to persuade employees to adapt the values, norms and ideas initiated by managers stating what is good, important and praiseworthy in terms of work and organizational life (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004). Thus, when exerting this form of control, managers both consciously and systematically try to ensure that employees adapt the values and ideals which the managers either themselves believe in, or at least deem adequate, in regard to what is best for the organization (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004).

Socio-ideological control can therefore be understood as the management of meaning, where the aim is to specify how organizational phenomena should be understood since ideologies have the power to influence principles, actions and feelings, while also dismaying what is unwanted (Czarniawska-Joerges 1988). In line with how control can be used to shape the employees actions and feelings a relevance for how control can shape employees identities to unite the organizations and employees perceptions is created.

2.3.2 Identity regulation

A further method of normative management is identity regulation, which involves getting employees to perceive that their self-image is consistent with the organization's values (Kärreman & Rylander, 2008). Alvesson and Willmott (2002) explain that identity regulation is about constructing, producing and maintaining symbols that are meant and interpreted in a way that benefits the organization and that gets employees to engage in particular forms of identity work. The authors further highlight that employees in organizations engage in identity work that primarily creates a sense of coherence and strong self-esteem, which is essential for mastering the tasks and social interactions that come with the job. Alvesson (2004) highlights that identity work is particularly important in organizations characterized by instability and a variety of groups and interactions, which is highlighted in the empirical evidence to be the case for the organizations studied. It should be made clear, however, that there is a difference between identification, which is a naturally occurring socialization process in which one's sense of self is influenced by the work one does, independent of formal management initiatives, and identity regulation, which is a management-initiated attempt to control this process (Rennstam, 2017).

Identity can be influenced, regulated and changed in various ways, one of the ways is to provide a precise definition of the individual to make them understand what their role is and how it differs from everyone else’s (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Ezzamel and Willmott (1998) argued that this can be done both through formal procedures such as appraisals as well as informal ways. The opposite way is to define the individual or group indirectly by applying undesirable characteristics to other individuals or groups who do not belong to the organization, thus indicating that those individuals or groups do not have a desirable behavior with the hope that employees will then do the opposite (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Furthermore, a third way is to establish particular vocabularies, archetypes and narratives for motives to create a set of reference points that point to what is important and natural for the employee to do and think (Mills, 1940). The author further highlights a fourth way which involves explaining morals and values through narratives to try to get employees to identify in a particular direction. Similarly, constructs of knowledge and skills can regulate the identity of employees as education and professional affiliation are linked to how one wants to be identified and therefore very powerful means of identity construction. Another powerful means of regulating identity is the development of social categories attributed to the individual, which create a sense of us and them, leading to a sense of a belonging membership, which then develops into a sense of community (Alvesson, 1995; Rosen 1985). Alvesson and Willmott (2002) argue that the hierarchy and the status differences that explain who one is can be used as a seventh means. Similarly, the authors argue that forward-thinking organizations can use the argument that their organization and its employees are the elite who are ahead of the rest of the competition. An effective means of identity construction is the establishment and fixing of ideas and norms that explain how things should be done in different contexts as a way of directing and guiding employees about what is natural or necessary for the company's work to function (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). This is effective, according to the authors, because it requires the regulation and alignment of self-perceptions and creates a collective sense of identity and purpose. The very last way Alvesson and Willmott (2002) argue that one can influence, regulate and change the identity of employees is by explaining the context and its conditions to the people acting in it, in order to encourage the skills and identity required in the context. Therefore a further comprehension of aspirational control is of interest as it enables the understanding of how communicating career paths can shape the employees.

2.3.3 Aspirational control

One way to regulate employee identity is through the exercise of aspirational control (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Thornborrow & Brown, 2009). This involves an attempt to "connect ready-made identities and identity projects to work positions and career trajectories by providing idealized images of self that speak to organizational members" (Costas & Kärreman, 2013, p. 407). By articulating clear career paths, Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) argue that employees can link their identity to a particular career, which enables the linking of how one sees oneself in relation to who one wants to become; in other words, it creates an identity that is associated with an expected position. Thus, employees' aspirations and orientations become regulated in relation to their experiences and expectations of a career path (Costas & Kärreman, 2013).

2.4 Research gap

We have in this literature review investigated different perspectives of organizational control. The research shows that organizational control practices have been utilized for decades and taken shape in different forms. The forms of direct, output based and normative control have been covered in previous research and literature and set in relation to vertical or horizontal relations in organizations (e.g.Weber 1946; Landes 1986; Mintzberg 1989; Barker 1993; Ouchi & Maguire, 1975; Rennstam, 2017; Johnson & Gill, 1993; Stewart, Courtright & Barrick, 2012), but surprisingly little has been in relation to career ladders in PSF's.

The little amount of research conducted on normative forms of control in relation to structures such as the career-ladders have resulted in aspirational control. Aspirational control as a concept is relatively new and as a result there is little research regarding this form of control. The closest previous study done on the subject are Foucauldian's ideas where labeling, classification, ranking utilized with confessions and the providing of templates were emphasized (e.g. Foucault 1976, 1980; Townley 1993). Another study on the subject presents mentoring and Management by Objectives (MBO) as integrating individual and corporate goals, respectively realizing corporate clones when people avow organizational imperatives as their own (Covaleski, Dirsmith, Heian & Samuel, 1998). Like Grey's study of career orientation as a self-project (1994), more recent studies have highlighted how management addresses employees' internal thoughts, desires and ears (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). The study accentuates how aspirational ideals communicated via employee well-being and health initiatives may connect an employee’s aspirational identity to the organization or seek to align “*lifestyle aspirations*” to the organization (Costas & Kärreman, 2013, p.411). Studies have stressed both the discursive nature of this kind of control (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Costas & Kärreman, 2013), as well as recently empahsised how other material modalities afford critical options for control and influence (Alcadipani & Islam, 2017; Paring, Pezé & Huault, 2017). The literature review shows a research gap regarding how the career ladder could function as a system of aspirational control which will therefore be argued for in this study.

3. Method

This chapter presents the chosen methodological approach utilized in this thesis. In the first section the ontological standpoint is presented, followed by a presentation of the research process. Further is the collection-, interview-, and analysis process presented. Lastly we present the quality assessment conducted.

3.1 Qualitative Research Strategy

We have in this study analyzed employees' view on climbing the career ladder within large professional service firms and how the structure of it enables the companies to exercise control. The aim was to attain a deep understanding of the interviewee's perception and we therefore chose to conduct a qualitative study (Bryman & Bell, 2017). The chosen method was chosen to facilitate the gathering of an in-depth empirical material to enable a study of the interviewees interpretation of their experiences. Whilst the choice of a quantitative method would rather lead to a breadth of knowledge within the career ladder subject (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). The study's purpose thus does not intend to draw any generalizing conclusions of the theoretical area but rather investigate a narrow part, therefore we intend to study the interviewees social reality, which is in line with a qualitative study, as a quantitative study would have resulted in quantifying the data collection (Bryman & Bell, 2017). The study's ontological standpoint is social constructivism, meaning that the interpreted reality is composed by the social actors' experiences and is constantly revised simultaneously as the actors have new experiences (Bryman & Bell, 2017). For our thesis, the understanding of the career ladder and its influences is based on the interviewees experiences and interpretations of it, therefore, our study's theoretical standpoint can be described as *interpretive* (Bryman & Bell, 2017). The ontological consideration is an enabling key for the thesis to study how the individuals are influenced by the career ladder in relation to control, promotions, and identity. The ontological standpoint provides the perspective of viewing the interviewees interpretation of the experiences as several constructional parts of their reality (Seale, 1999). The authors understand the limitations with the chosen method, which include subjectivity, difficulties to replicate the study as well as fragile transparency (Bryman & Bell, 2017), which we discuss further later in this chapter.

3.2 Abductive Approach

We have chosen to work with an abductive method to draw nuanced conclusions and be able to shape our study with emphasis on both empirical data and theory (Bryman & Bell, 2017). This has facilitated us to choose the most describing explanation when interpreting the empirical data according to Alvesson and Sköldberg (2008). For this thesis it was imperative to enable working simultaneously with theories and empirical material in the process of reducing and sorting, due to the numerous possible angles the interviewees exemplified regarding the career ladder. The abductive method decreases the difficulties with drawing more liberal assumptions and taking the human factor into consideration which enables us for more in-depth analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2017). The choice of method enables us therefore possibilities, and to avoid certain limitations connected to an inductive and deductive research method (Mitchell, 2018). The inductive method is linked to the criticism that even a large amount of empirical data necessarily will not support theory-building (Bryman & Bell, 2017). With consideration to our relatively small amount of empirical data an inductive method would therefore have restricted us when drawing conclusions. Furthermore, the deductive method would have hindered us if the selected research topic would have created difficulties choosing applicable theories (Bryman & Bell, 2017). The choice of abductive procedure rather enables to work alternatively with the empirical data and the theories and facilitates theoretical adjustments (Ahrne & Svensson, 2015). Furthermore, the abductive method was chosen to increase the possibilities to make surprising findings in the empirical data (Bryman & Bell, 2017).

3.3 Collection Process

3.3.1 Selection

To enable the study to answer the research question and purpose, a selection was made to sample interviewees suitable for the thesis. With the purpose of the study being to investigate employee's opinion and interpretation of the climb of a structured career ladder at large PSF's, we therefore chose to select employees at all levels of the career ladder to enable a gathering of versatile empirical material. Our collection process therefore resulted in a strategic sampling.

Bell, Bryman, and Harley (2019) entitle this method of sampling *purposive sampling,* which is explained as a selection that enables the gathering of relevant information that will be suitable for answering the research question and the study's purpose. Facilitating our aim of the sampling which was to ensure that we would get a variety of interpretations and experiences of the career ladder to enable nuanced analysis. As mentioned, we chose to interview employees at all the different levels in the career ladder, the interviewees therefore vary from being juniors in the organization and having associate roles to seniors being at the top of the ladder, having the role as partner. We delimited the area by only interviewing employees at three comparable companies that share almost identical career ladders, to ensure justifiable material that could support the study. The choice of using *purposive sampling* was predicated in the purpose of the study as it does not intend to draw any generalizing conclusion and therefore a non-probability sampling was done (Bryman & Bell, 2017).

3.3.2 Description of the study object

The *purposive sampling* resulted in ten interviews with employees from three very similar companies. The companies are within the professional service firm industry and were chosen due to having detailed career ladder structures. The selection of interviewees were predicted in the aim to reach a nuanced picture of all the steps in the career ladder. The distribution resulted in three employees from company A, three employees from company B and four employees from company C. In total, the selection resulted in four female employees and six male employees with a minimum of one interviewee from every level within the structure of the career ladder. The study requires a large degree of anonymity and thus no names of individuals or companies are disclosed to ensure anonymity.

Interviewee	Company	Role	Interview-length	Recorded	Transcribed pages
Employee 1	A	Associate	44:00	Yes	17
Employee 2	B	Senior Associate	44:19	Yes	24
Employee 3	C	Associate	45:27	Yes	23
Employee 4	C	Associate	1:18:59	Yes	39
Employee 5	B	Senior Manager	1:26:23	Yes	34
Employee 6	B	Manager	58:12	Yes	25
Employee 7	A	Partner	1:00:15	Yes	21
Employee 8	C	Manager	1:04:41	Yes	40
Employee 9	C	Associate	1:11:06	Yes	17
Employee 10	A	Senior Manager	1:06:27	Yes	25

3.3.3 Interview Process

The empirical data was collected through semi-structured interviews, meaning that an interview guide that enabled guidance and follow-up questions was constructed and followed. The choice of a semi-structured interview guide was based on the goal to have a structure that guided the interviewees through the four themes motivation, career, promotions, and alternative career opportunities rather than one that would determine the interview (Creswell, 2007). The aim was to enable follow-up questions to permeate the interviews by flexibility due to career, the career ladder, identity, and control being complex subjects. Therefore, our intent was to have open questions and have relaxed interviews to make the interviewees feel comfortable talking about all different experiences and opinions. With the aim to encourage the interviewees to tell their interpreted truth of their experienced reality and elaborate their answers rather than following cultural scripts and company storytelling (Alvesson, 2003). The aim for the material was to gather in-depth material about the interviewees' subjective perceptions and therefore semi-structured interviews were chosen as the collection method (Bryman & Bell, 2017).

The interviewees are located at different offices around Sweden and therefore the interviews were conducted digitally through Microsoft Teams. We constructed the interviews so one interviewer was in charge and had responsibility to guide the interviewee through the themes with support of the semi-structured guide. The two other interviewers therefore had the opportunity to focus more on what the interviewee said and could construct well-suited follow-up questions that enabled us to gather in-depth empirical data that we could analyze (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015). The interviews were recorded with both audio and video turned on with the permission of the interviewee, to facilitate the collection of the data and our understanding of the interviewee's intention with certain answers. The possibility to record the interviews when conducting digital interviews was strongly emphasized in the decision. The recordings were then transcribed first through Microsoft Teams transcribing program and afterwards we went through the transcriptions at the same time as listening to the recordings, to ensure the correctness. In total the interviews varied between 44 minutes and 86 minutes and resulted in approximately 270 transcribed pages. Bryman and Bell (2017) argue that transcribing enables a better understanding for the interviewers as well as enhances the quality of the study due to a more nuanced analysis being conducted. It could be argued that interviews in person would have enabled more relaxed interviews which could have been beneficial, though it could also be argued that digital interviews enable the interviewees to distance themselves and elaborate honest answers.

3.4 Analysis Process

The analysis process was conducted through the three-step approach regarding analyzing qualitative empirical data presented by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015). The method was chosen to facilitate an overview of the data, the process consists of sorting, reduction, and argumentation. The three-step approach enabled us to find the common threads regarding the career ladder in the material, which raised the quality of the thesis as well as being a tool for efficiency. The following parts of the analysis process are divided by the three-steps to create clarity in our approach.

3.4.1 Sorting

The first step in the analysis process after the gathering of empirical data and transcription was to sort the material. Our initial sorting resulted in a few large categories that did not facilitate an overview but rather indicated directions in the material. Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015) highlight the phenomena *chaos-problem,* which they explain as the consequence of difficulties when initiating to overview and structure the material. They explain the problem to arise because of the materials size often being extensive when conducting qualitative research. In our analysis process the phenomena was highly present as the empirical data consisted of 270 transcribed pages, we therefore followed Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015) approach of getting familiar with the material by discussing it together and going through it numerous times. This gave us a better understanding of the material and enabled us to distinguish interesting details rather than viewing the obvious findings. We conducted several categories and the sorting process resulted early on in 25 different categories with each having one or several subcategories.

The sorting process resulted in multiple contradictory findings being made regarding the desire to climb the career ladder, and we divided the material into numerous categories to proceed the sorting process. We used subcategories to facilitate an understanding of common threads through the material as well as distinguishing the contradictions that were found. The size of the material required us to re-sort the material several times to create clarity in the data and the categories were constantly revised. Our sorting process goes in line with Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015) arguments regarding re-sorting being a tool to obtain in-depth understanding and find new categories. The approach suited our abductive method to revise our empirical material during the work with the thesis.

3.4.2 Reduction

The second step of the analysis process was the reduction of the material to a manageable amount of data (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2015). The process was done to clarify and highlight the categories we found most interesting and representative for the material. The work was characterized by being selective and removing categories, findings in leadership and incorrect promotions was removed in order to keep a common thread. Reducing the material enabled us to manage *the representational problem* that Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015) describes as the amount of data hindering the authors from presenting all parts of the material. By categorizing the material, we could reduce it by selecting representative parts of the data which resulted in a few angles of organizational career ladders. As previously mentioned the material was categorized in several steps which lead to various subheadings, when selecting categories, we saw the process as a dialogue with the material (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015), which helped us keep a clear common thread in the empirical material when reducing. The subcategories assisted us when discarding certain parts to enable the material to describe and to be representational of the interviewees' experiences and facilitated our process of finding strong links between the empirical data and theories chosen.

3.4.3 Argumentation

The last step in the analysis process was to argue for our thesis with support from our empirical material, Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015) describe this as *the authority problem*. It is described as the difficulties to be heard in the society of knowledge; it emphasizes the use of empirical data when arguing for your thesis to succeed in formulating a theoretical contribution. Our process of building supportive arguments was constantly revised, due to our abductive method we went back and forth between the theories and empirical material with the aim to formulate the data as theoretical arguments in accordance with Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015). The method was used for choosing suitable material to answer our research question and purpose.

3.5 Quality Assessment

Our qualitative study is based on interviewees interpretations and thoughts regarding several aspects about the career ladder and therefore contains large amounts of subjectivity (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Regarding the quality of a study, several different criteria can be used to ensure value (Bryman, Bell & Harley, 2019). To achieve quality in our thesis, we have applied the two criterias: trustworthiness and authenticity. The criterias were first used for quantitative research (Bryman, Bell & Harley, 2019) and are therefore without interpretation and adaptation difficult to apply to a qualitative thesis. In this thesis we chose to use the interpretations made by Lincoln and Gubas (1985) and Yardley (2000). Lincoln and Gubas (1985) clarify that trustworthiness consists of four sub-criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Yardley (2000) presents four criterias for authenticy: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance. They do highlight the problematic fact that these two criteria assume that there is one absolute reality, which demonstrates the critical perspective to find objective truths in the social world.

3.5.1 Trustworthiness

Bryman and Bell (2017) explain that credibility is an important tool to achieve trustworthiness as the social reality can have several different interpretations. The study aimed to describe the social reality explained by the interviewees. Due to the timeline's limitation of the thesis a *respondent validation* was not carried out, which Bryman and Bell (2017) states as a tool to strengthen the credibility. By conducting a collection process with a large variation of study subjects to gather a nuanced material within the narrow investigation area we enabled the argumentation to be supported by several angles. The process was conducted with the aim to achieve credibility, which is a technique Lincoln and Gubas (1985) recommend, called *triangulation*.

Transferability is mentioned as a difficult concept to achieve when conducting a qualitative study, due to having unique aspects and social reality constantly changing (Bryman & Bell, 2017). We therefore aimed to produce a study with *thick descriptions* which is a method described by Geertz (1973, cited in Bryman & Bell, 2017), with the aim to provide others with a large amount of empirical material to make their own judgments regarding the transferability of the thesis.

The thesis dependability in qualitative studies is argued by Lincoln and Gubas (1985) to be achieved through an *auditing approach.* Meaning to keep all records that have been from the research process, to facilitate dependability we have gathered all material in one document to enable peers to overview the material. We are humble regarding the difficulties to achieve dependability when conducting qualitative research because the datasets are large and difficult to investigate. Our thesis has been reviewed two times during peer-reviews by our study colleagues and by our supervisor in connection to feedback meetings.

To achieve a degree of confirmability we have during the process of writing the thesis had discussions where all three were allowed to present their perception of the material to minimize that our own subjective opinions should impact the study. We are aware that absolute objectivity is impossible to achieve when conducting business research (Bryman & Bell, 2017). To strengthen the confirmability our study colleagues have during the peer-reviews focused on viewing the study critically and investigating if our results and conclusions can be drawn with base in our empirical data.

3.5.2 Authenticity

We have applied the *sensitivity to context* criteria through being responsive in the process of building our thesis with consideration both for the empirical data and theoretical positions (Yardley, 2000). As the empirical material consists of the interviewees' experiences and opinions which could be perceived as sensitive, we have kept both the companies and the interviewees completely anonymous. The investigated subject is an area all three of the authors are very interested in and therefore a high engagement has been reflected throughout the writing. The *commitment* of Yardley's (2000) second criteria is described as having an interest in the area and was therefore achieved. *Rigour* is explained as the need for having skills, meticulous data collection and well-founded analysis (Yardley, 2000). Our writing process consisted of major research in the subject to have the knowledge and necessary understanding of the subject. The work with the analysis consisted of several revisions to ensure quality and trustworthiness. Yardley's (2000) third criteria seeks clear research methods, arguments that are clarified and having a reflexive viewpoint. *Transparency and coherence* were achieved by following clear research methods mirroring the paper throughout the writing process. The last criteria from Yardley (2000) are *impact and importance* which emphasize that the thesis needs to have an impact on either theory or on the study subject. Throughout the work with the thesis, we have aimed to achieve a theoretical contribution to achieve this aspect of trustworthiness.

4. Empirical findings & Analysis

This section presents and analyzes the empirical material collected. To achieve a clear presentation and representation of the material we have divided the interpretations to enable a strong argumentation for our findings. Initially, in 4.1 is the willingness of employees to climb the career ladder and the different reasons behind it presented. Furthermore, in 4.2 it is analyzed how the career ladder itself is perceived. Section 4.3 identifies a common aspiration to reach the top of the career ladder and thus become Partner, followed by 4.4 which presents a shared expectation to climb the career ladder, that is almost automatic and without any further effort. Finally 4.5 exemplifies how the experience of the top of the career ladder begins to feel almost impossible to reach and halts the employee's career advancements.

4.1 Desiring to climb the Career Ladder through promotions

When asked to describe their organizational career-ladder, a commonly shared aspect amongst the employees interviewed, was their desire to climb upwards through the organization with the aim to reach more senior positions. Their experiences exemplify that there is an indication that one should seek vertical advancements within the organization. Although their reasons varied somewhat, the general notion was that the climb was important for them.

> *There is a motivating factor with upward advancements. I think of the promotion as being both a fun occasion and in a way an acknowledgement you receive for what you have done.* (Employee 7)
>
> *I myself aspire to be promoted during this next year and think of it as being fun, especially fun to be able to take the next step forward.* (Employee 5)

Both Employee 7 and 5 describe their view of promotions as being a desirable aspect worth working for. Employee 7 considers both the possibility to move vertically in the organization as desirable and the occasion of the promotion as a rewarding occasion. The interviewee also emphasizes that promotions are *"an acknowledgement"* that represents the hard work that has gone into achieving them. It can be interpreted that promotions are a joyous event for Employee 7 and that it means something important since it is the result of hard work. Similar thoughts are mentioned by Employee 5 who aspires to be promoted, and indicates that the desire is predicated on the impacts a new role will have. Another employee describes that "*For me it has always been that I want to get promoted and that is what I have worked towards."* (Employee 6). This statement given by the interviewee could be interpreted that a central part of the career is to advance through promotions and reach more senior positions. It could be understood from the three examples, that the interviewees have a shared desire for climbing the career ladder through promotions vertically.

Employee 7 describes the desire to climb to arise from the fact that "*Career on the surface is what type of position that you have had, meaning how you have climbed the ladder."* (Employee 7). The interviewee emphasizes that the reason behind why one should climb is that the "*type of position you have had"* when having climbed the career-ladder to certain roles within the organization, shows how far you have taken your career and can also be interpreted as how successful you are. This description gives the impression that employees feel that it is of great importance to climb up in the organization to be considered successful.

Another view of why promotions matter is the common understanding that each new step in the career ladder brings new areas of development and new opportunities. Employee 9 exemplifies this through the following quote:

> *[...] When you get promoted, it becomes an opportunity to [do] more fun things in a project, to be able to guide your colleagues in a different way, to meet clients in contexts*

> *where you might be guiding them. [...] Taking the next step also means that you get new stuff and learn new things and that's what's fun.* (Employee 9)

This demonstrates that the structure of promotions is connected to more rewards than a new title, meaning that promotions and climbing the career ladder is rewarded in multiple ways. A recurring concept was the inspiration the interviewees connected to being in a cutting edge company, which the employees referred to when they wanted to highlight that they have the opportunity in their job to "*see and shape the corporate society rather than being reactive and responding to the change that is happening."* (Employee 5). For many, it is an essential factor for drive and motivation *"to constantly be the usp at the cutting edge [and] drive that change"* (Employee 5). Employee 1 also mentions the knowledge aspect as a aspirational factor:

> *We are enabled and pushed to develop, to be highly knowledgeable in our areas. We are constantly keeping up to date, researching what's going on and learning what might be good to know in terms of technical tools, regulations and similar. So there is quite a lot of focus on training. This is exactly what I seek, I get to constantly learn and we also go on an educational trip every year*. (Employee 1)

The interviewee exemplifies the positive factors that are linked to the role and the structure of the company, which enables the employee to keep developing. These various rewards that come with climbing the career ladder could be interpreted to make the employee more inclined and motivated to climb the career ladder.

The interviewees emphasized that the desire to climb the career ladder was also strengthened by the internal satisfaction an advancement upwards gave. Employee 3 describes the sensation of advancements upward as "*You get these dopamine-kicks when you become promoted"*. This could be interpreted as the employee considering that every step of the climb to be a joyful event that motivates the employee to chase these dopamine-kicks further, meaning to climb further in the organization. Employee 7 describes advancements as "*... Of course, these promotions are confirmation that you are good at what you do, and that the organization wants you to take the next step.".* The quote exemplifies that the interviewee interprets promotions to be considered as a communication tool that the organization uses to express gratitude for an employee. The employee emphasized *"take the next step"* as an indication that the organization wants to provide further opportunities for the employee to feel appreciated. This could further be understood as Employee 7 finding it necessary to stay on toes since the organization rewards the employees, as long as adequate work is produced and is a prerequisite for the employee to further rise in the ranks. Although emphasized in different ways, both interviewees share the notion that promotions provide a wholesome and rewarding feeling, and therefore influence them to further pursue these promotions.

While many of the other employees spoke of promotions as internally rewarding, in a similar fashion as the previous two, one employee accentuated the effect that a promotion had on one's self-confidence to a degree.

> *It is easier to feel more self-confident when you are assigned to a complex project and you have got the title of manager than if you would still be an associate, because you then, in a way, also have managed to get the organization to believe in you.* (Employee 5)

According to Employee 5, feeling *"more self-confident when assigned to a complex project"* is made possible because one has advanced in the organizational ranks. It can be understood that this self-confidence stems from feeling more legitimized to deal with complex projects since one has managed to get the organization to *"believe in you"*. By understanding the expectations associated with the role and embracing that one has earned the position, the employee can tackle the complex projects with more confidence. Thus, not only is the climb up the career-ladder motivational and exciting, but the newly assigned role also provides a sense of reassurance and confidence to the employee which can be understood as additionally inspiring to climb the steps.

Furthermore, the career ladder is emphasized by the interviewees as a factor that designs a desire to climb, as it paints a picture of the potential career path for the individuals. Employee 4 mentioned:

> *I am extremely determined towards wanting to climb up in the ranks here. (...) The career-ladder is there for a reason. It is there so that your hard work here can lead to something and is in that way very motivating (...). It is there so that you can take the next step.* (Employee 4)

Employee 4 expresses that "*the career-ladder is there for a reason"* with the reason being that one should climb. Employee 4 highlights that one's "*hard work can lead to something*" and refers to this "*something"* as a way "*so that you can take the next step"*. In other words, the employee indicates the desire to climb is facilitated and interrelated to the existence of the ladder which is a way to advance upwards and thus reach higher positions vertically within the organization. Employee 5 also exemplified during the interview how "*It makes it more accessible"* to have a desire for climbing, when the company has a clear career ladder. Furthermore, Employee 4 finds the ladder to be of great importance as this leading "*to something*" feels "*very motivating*" and rewarding for the hard work one has put in. Employee 1 states:

> *... Then a sense of achievement is created where one thinks to themselves, "ah, now two years have gone by, and I will soon be bumped up to a senior role which will feel great. Then another two years will have gone by, and I will have become manager". So, I believe that a sense of achievement is created in that way (...).* (Employee 1)

Very similar to Employee 4's statement regarding the career ladder *"leading to something"*, Employee 1 considers promotions to create a sense of achievement where for instance the move to a more senior role *"will feel great"*. Being able to conceptualize that the climb to a certain position is X or Y years away, helps create a continued sense and desire to acquire this achievement, indicating that the conceptualization breeds a drive. The employees' examples indicate that the structure provides positive internal feelings for climbing upwards in the career ladder creating an aspiration for advancements as a result of the structure.

4.2 The career ladder structures and supports

Several of the employees also emphasized throughout the interview that they perceived the career ladder to provide support for them which is mentioned as a tool to steer the employees career direction. The career ladder is also mentioned to create a solid structure in their respective organizations which the employees find imperative.

The interviewees mentioned several times how the structure of the career ladder is an imperative part of the organization to enable efficiency and to create clear work roles, exemplified by Employee 9 and 10:

> *But in an organization of this magnitude, it is my belief that it is necessary to have a [career]-ladder to apply some structure. To set some structure in our way of working and where one is headed (...).* (Employee 9)

> *... It is needed from a business-standpoint so that we in some way can categorize and have different price tags for what the consultants' different levels of experience actually cost. If you want ten years of experience it is going to cost this much because then you receive counseling at a higher level. If you want to pay less, then you will receive counseling from someone with less years of experience.* (Employee 10)

Employee 9 emphasizes that the career-ladder provides structure and states that it *"in an organization of this magnitude"* is needed to navigate. Since Employee 9 considers the career-ladder necessary to set structure in the *"way of working and where one is headed"*, it can be interpreted that without it the employee would feel disoriented in the organization. By having this clear structure, employees can therefore better understand the meaning of their work and what they are expected to be able to do. This is agreed by Employee 10 who considers the career-ladder to be a necessity for the organization to conduct business properly since it enables *"some way to categorize and have different price tags"*, thus aiding the organizations in allocating the adequate counseling to the various customers' different needs. It can be interpreted from Employee 10 that without the career ladder and the structure it provides, there would be no feasible way to position the value of different people in the business, nor to sustain the competitive advantage this provides.

Similarly, without the career ladder Employee 7 states the *"clarification for your next step and position would not be as clear"*. The employee argues that the purpose of the career ladder is precisely to provide explanations for the steps in the organizational hierarchy and the demands for each role to the employees. Although the emphasis is different, all three employees consider the career-ladder to provide a much-needed structure. Whereas the career-ladder according to Employee 9 helps guide the employee's work output and therefore how to climb upwards, Employee 10 considers the career-ladder to guide the understanding of who has climbed to what position in the organization. While Employee 7 indicates the difficulties that would arise without clarification.

The career ladder structure could be argued to influence the employees to seek and work for reaching promotions. Employee 7 points out that "*the company wants you to take the next step"*, which suggests that the employee feels directed or pushed to reach the next career level. Employee 10 exemplifies a similar interpretation that the structure creates an expectation: *"There is an expectation on you, that you will develop and get to the next level"*. It could be reasoned that Employee 2 also exemplifies the same kind of influence the career ladder has when stating "*"There is a delegating structure towards associates for building their skills and abilities for their next role."* (Employee 2). The quotes imply that a structure is shaped to make the employees ready for advancements in the career. Similarly, Employee 5 explains how coaching is used to facilitate advancements by stating that "*[I] received a lot of coaching to learn skills, so I was able to cope with the new role"* indicating a structure within the career ladder that supports the employee to quickly adapt to the new requirements the advancement demands. It could be understood that the companies want and expect the employees to advance upwards in the career ladder, which is facilitated and emphasized through the designed structure the interviewees perceive, implying that the interviewees feel steered towards promotions.

4.3 Reaching Partner position

Climbing to the top of the organization's career ladder to become a Partner was a desire communicated by all employees. Becoming a Partner was considered by them to be the top of the career ladder and the most desirable position. Many who described their hopes for the future specifically mentioned the will to achieve a successful career, referring to reaching the top of the organizational career ladder, thus becoming a Partner.

The linkage between the role Partner and the top of the career is exemplified in the observation where the role and title, Partner, is linked to a high degree of prestige. Employee 10 exemplifies this through the following quote:

> *Many roles are important, and I know the company values all seniors, but it has always been the different types of formal managerial roles that have more prestige. Reaching a Partner role is the biggest managerial responsibility, which I think many see as the ultimate prestige.* (Employee 10)

The employee points out that the company "*values all seniors"*, but despite this, there seems to be an idealized image of the role 'Partner', which therefore can be understood to create an aspiration for it. The image of Partner being idealized is in line with Employee 4's and 1's thoughts of the role, *"It is clear that it would be magical to become a Partner."* (Employee 4), and “*Yes, of course my goal is to become a Partner.”*(Employee 1). It could be interpreted that the companies have shaped an environment which is designed to view the Partner role as the ultimate achievement. This is in line with Employee 5 who stated that “*The last step for me would be to become a Partner.”* indicating that the career ladder to successfully make the role of Partner seem as the final goal.

The interviewees stated there were several aspects that influenced them to desire the role of Partner. One aspect mentioned was the possibility to become part-owner, Employee 5 mentions that *“You then get to buy in as a part-owner in the company and you own a couple of shares. You get a dividend according to how it goes for us as a company and technically you set your own salary”*. The employee described the possibility of becoming part-owner as an attractive trait and something to desire. Employee 4 also emphasizes the desirability in buying into the company and becoming part-owner, stating that *“It would be great, it is a Partner owned company so it would be like being self-employed.”*, Implying that the interviewee views the part-ownership as highly appealing.

The Partner role is further described by the interviewees as including several attractive traits, Employee 3 finds the monetary aspect a driving force and states that “*the salary is of course a motivating part of it”* when discussing the pros with being promoted to Partner. Yet another reason for becoming Partner is provided by Employee 7 who states that *“The partnership is like an entrance ticket to a very exciting context; it is a very rewarding environment, and the effort is worth it.”* Being a Partner is therefore portrayed as a role that includes a lifestyle, a high monetary reward and prestige. It can be understood that the role of Partner represents a flourishing career that involves several factors and therefore is deemed the highest possible achievement and ultimate goal within the organization. In summary, it indicates that the career ladder is designed and communicated to create a desire to reach the top of the organization, with the goal of making employees believe that working in the company will result in great rewards.

4.4 Riding the career-escalator instead of the ladder

Several times throughout our interviews, the employees spoke on how they expected their climb to proceed and not only their desire to accomplish it. The interviews revealed inter alia that employees had a perception that the career ladder is rather fixed with each step expected to take a certain amount of years. Interestingly, although the interviews were held with employees from three different organizations, the employees spoke very similarly on how many years they expected that they would have to work before being promoted.

> *There is a predictability for the promotions in the organization so I subconsciously know that after five years I will have become a manager if I do everything correctly.* (Employee 1)

> *I know that here, if I do a great job within two years, then I will be promoted. Most often not shorter than the two-year period, but also not longer, and that allows me to know that there is a chance for me here. After that it becomes vague since it might take three or five years to reach the next promotion.* (Employee 4)

The employees speak with certainty in their assumption of how long it will take them to move upwards the career-ladder. An interesting aspect is that their descriptions of the career ladder are so detailed in their predictions on how many years each step will take. Whereas Employee 1 *"subconsciously"* knows where five years will have taken the employee, Employee 4 describes that the following two promotions are *"two years"* and *"three or five"* apart. Employee 2 states*"If you have done what you were expected to during your first three years, then you will also move on to [become] senior associate.",* indicating a certainty for the future promotions when stating that it should take three years to reach the next level. Many employees shared in a very similar manner how many years they deemed it would take to reach different positions within the career-ladder and were oftentimes rather detailed. Even more interesting was that their assumptions, aside from the two highest positions, were almost identical even though the employees were in different organizations. Hence, it can be understood that there is a shared notion regarding how many years it should take for an employee to climb the initial positions above associate level, and that there is a certainty one will climb. This suggests that the career ladder therefore is very fixed and structured, with set years indicating when to be promoted.

The interviewed employees expressed that they appreciate this fixed career ladder because it enabled them to foresee how far away the next promotion was, since it could reassure them that they would indeed move forward. Employee 1 clarifies this by the following quote:

> *The reason why the [organization] has a rather clear and detailed career-ladder in the beginning, is to give the employees a clear picture of what awaits them in the future.* (Employee 1)

> *The details are there, so it really is an opportunity for you to view and understand where your career is headed. (...) It has a clear structure to be followed.* (Employee 4)

For Employee 1, the career-ladder provides *"a clear picture of what awaits"*, thus indicating that the employee can conceive how the employee's career will play out from starting as an associate and onwards. When saying this, Employee 1 spoke in very broad terms, implying that this is considered by many. Employee 4 further strengthens this notion by underscoring that *"there is a plan"* for the employee. With Employee 4 emphasizing that one can *"understand where your career is headed"*, we see that both employees cherish the "*plan"* and *"clear picture"* provided by the career ladder.

Similarly, the 'plan' and 'clear picture' provided by the career ladder may suggest that there are certain expectations of what employees should have achieved.

> *The reasoning behind why it should take three years is that after three years of learning from being assigned to projects, all of that should have provided you with skills and the ability to perform at a senior associate level.* (Employee 2)
>
> *If you have been employed for four years, then you have probably also learnt more in those years and that is why there exists an expectation to get promoted.* (Employee 8)

According to Employee 2, having spent *"three years of learning from being assigned to projects"* should equip an employee with the *"skills and the ability"* to move from an associate to senior associate position within the organization. Thus, it can be interpreted that Employee 2 considers that it can be expected of the employee to have accumulated these skills and abilities. Employee 4 also speaks of an underlying expectation associated with probably having "*learnt more in those years"* and that this should equip the employee with the knowledge to move up. While neither of them mentions the level of difficulty related to amassing the skills and knowledge required to meet the expectations, it can be understood that it at least is on a level that everyone can accomplish during the pronounced timeframe. Considering that other employees also spoke of being able to reach higher positions in X or Y years, at least for the two positions following from associate level, further indicates that they expect everyone to accomplish this initial climb.

However, although the employees are expected to climb within a set of years due to learning from the assigned projects, oftentimes employees also spoke of having to do the right thing to be promoted. They described it as an environment in which the employees perceive that doing *"everything correct"*, having done *"what you were expected to"* and having done a *"great job"* will eventually lead to a promotion. This is exemplified by Employee 2 saying: "*If you have done what you were expected to during your first three years, then you will also move on to [become] senior associate."*. Similarly, Employee 4 says, "*I know that if I do a good job, there is* *a plan for me*" and Employee 1 through the quote at the beginning of section 4.4, *"[...] if I do everything correctly"*, emphasizes that this is indeed deeply rooted in their perception of what leads to a promotion. It can therefore be interpreted that there is an unspoken clear code of what is considered to be correct behavior and that employees have a clear picture of what it means to actually "*do a good job*".

By doing "*a good job*" it has been established that one gets promoted which is clarified by the quote below:

> *You can view the career-ladder as a sort of promise that if you show up here, develop and do what we ask you to do while maintaining curiosity on how you can improve your performance and develop yourself, then there is a way for you to grow here.* (Employee 7)

Employee 7 goes as far as calling the career-ladder *"a sort of promise"*, implying that it is something that undoubtedly will provide you with guidance and room to "*grow"* if you put in some effort. Growing in this context can be understood as learning and amassing the necessary skills to take the next step and in this context meaning to get promoted and continue moving upwards the organization to grow further from here. This promise is characterized by the organizational desire for employees to continuously climb the career ladder and is exemplified by Employee 9: "*Our organization is designed so that people can take the next step all the time. (...) It is unusual that no one gets promoted",* and by Employee 10: "*[...] The aim is that everyone should be able to advance further continuously"*. Employee 9 considers it to be part of the organizational design that the *"next step"* is expected to be pursued by employees continuously, and that it is *"unusual that no one"* ends up staying in the same places indefinitely. Employee 10 shares the perception that the aim in this organization, which is not the same organization as Employee 9's, is to *"advance further continuously"* too. Both employees understand it as an integrated part in their organizations, and many of the other employees perceived it the same way. It can therefore be interpreted as a promise that all employees will eventually be promoted.

This promise is further reinforced by the identified phenomenon of employees being promoted in the initial phases simultaneously as other employees whom they were employed with in cohorts.

> *It is of course a risk to have cohorts, and you need to understand that there will be different performances, but you could in simple terms say that during the initial steps whole cohorts move up to the next level as a group.* (Employee 10)

> *I believe it has a lot to do with being employed in groups. It becomes a situation where someone gets promoted a little too early just because everyone else in the group was promoted then, instead of giving that person the chance to show that they can handle it.* (Employee 8)

According to Employee 10, *"cohorts move up to the next level as a group"* in the initial phases, which is considered a risk by the employee since the individual performances in the cohort vary in quality. It can be understood that by viewing it as a risk, Employee 10 is hinting towards that there are employees who do not really meet the criteria, but still get to move forward together with their cohort even though they are not ready for that next step. Employee 8 also considers some to get *"promoted a little too early"* with the reason for this being that *"everyone else in the group were promoted then"*. Although it is not entirely clear why Employee 8 believes that managers take such a reason into account, it can be presumed that it has to do with wanting to create a strong image that all employees in the organization should constantly be promoted and not fall behind. It could also be that the initial levels are not considered too difficult by the superiors and that an employee should be able to grow into those roles.

Considering the aforementioned perception of a promise, Employee 10 mentions the importance of carefully evaluating candidates and *"not recruiting on a win or lose basis"*, which can be interpreted as the organization hiring people, they deem able enough to manage what is expected of them workwise so that they can grow into more senior roles. Although not shocking that these organizations hire people considered skilled, or at least able enough, it becomes interesting in relation to that the promotions, logically, should come from some reasoning too.

> *We put a lot of time in really looking at the talent pool that we have and who could be ready for a promotion and why we should question some of them, and to then see to it so that we can evaluate people on the same basis.* (Employee 7)

Employee 7 considers the organization to *"put a lot of time in really looking at the talent pool"*, and that *"we*", in this case interpreted as superiors in the organization, want to *"evaluate people on the same basis".* From Employee 7's statement it can be understood that lots of consideration and evaluation are put into promotions to ensure that those who are promoted also deserve it the most. However, given the previous statements from the interviewed employees which indicated that they clearly can conceptualize how many years away their next promotion is, and that they are expected to advance for several reasons, and that cohorts are promoted simultaneously, does make the statement rather contradictory. It can be understood from Employee 7 that the ambition is there, but that it in practice does not play out this way since the empirical findings indicate that the interviewees consider career promotions as something certain.

Thus far, the empirical findings have indicated that employees speak with certainty that they will be promoted to higher positions in a specific number of years, which are very similar across the organizations. Furthermore the findings also show that employees perceive that they are expected to do so in those given years for several reasons and that all employees are promoted in the initial steps of the career-ladder. It can therefore be interpreted that the process of climbing the career-ladder, at least up to senior manager and especially associate to senior associate, is being described as more of a ride than climb. It is as if the career-ladder initially is more of a career-escalator, where the escalator enables employees to hop on a comfortable and certain ride that will take them to a given direction, in this case meaning a higher position in their career ladder. Although never described as anything else than a ladder, the career-escalator metaphor makes more sense as a depiction of how the interviewees perceive the initial phases of "climbing up the career-ladder". The career escalator is reinforced by the fundamental understanding that exists regarding superiors aiming, and the organizational design being there, to push employees towards the next step throughout their career. This underscores the common notion that promotions appear to be a certainty, given that a *"great job"* is done.

4.5 The Mountain

There was a noticeable difference in how employees spoke of the upward promotions during the initial steps of the career ladder and the last steps when being at senior positions, especially the role of Partner. As previously mentioned above, the initial steps through the career ladder were described in a way that allowed for an interpretation of the ladder to be an escalator. However, when the interviewees described the steps to become Director and Partner the interpretation of the climb changed.

4.5.1 Climbing difficulties arise

When the interviewed employees spoke of their perception of the journey to partnership, many described that it was rather difficult to reach that level since it demanded a lot and several employees even described it as unreachable.

> *Initially it is unusual to not be promoted, but the further up you get in the career ladder the more common it is to not be promoted and therefore remain at the current level.* (Employee 9)

> *The demands are much higher. I would not say that it stops, but I would say it becomes more and more important how to build a business case for your promotion the further up you are.* (Employee 10)

Employee 9 and 10 both describe that they perceive it to be harder and harder to reach the higher levels the further up they climb. Employee 9 states that "*the further up*" an employee is, the more usual it is to "*remain in the current*" role. It could be understood that Employee 9 interprets that career advancements stop at the levels of Manager and Director due to Partner level being unreachable. Employee 10 highlights that building a *"business case"* for the future promotions becomes important and can be interpreted that it does not suffice to simply do what the employee has done previously to move up. Since *"the demands are much higher"* now according to Employee 10, it can be understood that moving further craves performance and commitment to a degree far higher than before. The high requirements is also exemplified by Employees 6 and 9 who state *"You have to work and toil that little extra and make yourself available at all times.*" (Employee 6), and *"You have to be ambitious and prioritize the work. To reach you need to work a little harder to bring the project to completion."* (Employee 9). The quotes exemplify how the career ladder becomes more and more difficult and demanding on the individual. With the promotions at higher levels being described as more complex and individual, the comfortable ride up the *career-escalator* seems to have changed to a more demanding climb, which is further accentuated by the Employee 1.

> *From the manager role and upwards it is rather a bit more of an assessment in whether they think you deserve a promotion; you need to have both experience and knowledge.* (Employee 1)
>
> *One needs to have a broad understanding of all parts of the business. How to plan and guide others, understand what risks are there for every project, what is important for this company. I think there are slightly different angles depending on where you are.* (Employee 6)

Employee 1 describes how *“both experience and knowledge”* are imperative to become promoted further. The notion that it now is more of *“an assessment in whether they think you deserve a promotion”*, indicates that it is not as easy and straightforward to climb as it initially was. However, Employee 6 describes that the knowledge and experience amassed must be especially extensive for the top position of the career ladder. Exemplifying the broad range of skills demanded, the interviewee states *“how to plan and guide others”*as well as an expectation to understand *“what risks are there”* and *“what is important for the company”*. To reach the top is described as demanding and the need to have a broad range of skills in several areas and not only one's chosen profession. The need for a wide range of skills and traits to become a Partner was further motivated by Employee 7.

> *Then the partnership is the next step, you need to have a very wide range of skills, you must be able to lead, have good technical skills, you need to be well established on the market. But as good as you are developing yourself you need to be at developing others. You are good at developing teams and getting them to perform in a good way and you have a genuine business interest that allows you to be involved in developing this company for the future.”* (Employee 7)

The employee describes in a detailed manner what someone with the desire to reach partnership status must posess. Employee 7 describes how *“a range of skills"*, being *“able to lead”*, *“good technical skills" and* that being *“well established on the market”* are expected of someone at this level, but also that one must be as good at *“developing others"* as oneself. The employee lists demanding objectives and skills that not only should be reflected on the performance of someone at this level, but that it also should improve the overall performance of those working under and with the Partner. Employee 3 further underscores the demanding environment and journey associated with reaching Partner level by sharing the perception that *“even if you have worked for 20 years, it is no guarantee that everyone becomes Partner.”*.

The way in which the interviewees so far describe the journey towards the most senior positions, especially that of Partner, in comparison to the journey described in section 4.4, differ a lot. Whereas the latter appeared to be an escalator ride, the former portrays more of a demanding climb up a steep mountain, where the top is the Partner position with all its demanding expectations.

4.5.2 Inadequate guidance for the top role

The difficulties to reach Partner level was described in 4.5.1 as a result of the demanding skills needed, in this section the difficulties are described as a result of the requirements being unclear and therefore difficult to comprehend.

One reason for the change in attitude towards promotions is partly explained by the employees viewing the higher levels of the career ladder as too complicated to fully grasp. The previously mentioned clear perception of the structure related to promotions presented in chapter 4.2, seems to have vanished since the interviewed employees appear to lack a clear understanding of what the skills they consider necessary to become promoted all the way to Partner level actually entail. Employee 4 exemplifies how the structure and communication for promotions are vague and unclear when reaching the higher levels.

> *It is no longer like a fixed period of time, it is based on showing that you really have that extra, that you are versatile, have great leadership, are good with customers and you have been able to work with people in different projects with great responsibility as well.* (Employee 4)

The employee describes the somewhat generic traits for being promoted to higher roles and it can be understood that the employee does not have a clear understanding of the specific level that the requirements must reach. The interviewee could for instance not specify further what "*great leadership"* entailed and to what degree being *"good with customers"* needed to be. Hence, this indicates that the clear structure the employee described for the lower levels in section 4.2, has ceased to exist for the higher levels. Another account presenting the uncertainties regarding the criterias for Partner is stated by Employee 5:

> *You need to work a lot of hours and focus on the right things. It's not just about being good, but you should have something extra that makes you stand out. I know that some might have gotten there for their achievements, but then you have to be innovative and come up with something valuable for the company.* (Employee 5)

Employee 5 mentions that "*you should have something extra"* as one of many criteria, which exemplifies the vague requirements the interviewees interpret the company to communicate and indicates that the *career-escalator* has rather turned into a steep mountain climb within the clouds and is the path to the top is therefore difficult to see. The interviewees highlight numerous demands that lack clarifying, leading to halt in the climbing process for the employees. The interviewees also mention that you have to be reflective, to understand what knowledge gaps you have for becoming a complete leader. Employee 10 explains it as *"You need to understand yourself, which gaps you have and be willing to fill these. For me it is a long project even though I have a coach"*. The interviewee describes that the requirement for reaching the top is both complex but above all time consuming.

4.5.3 Loses sight of the goal

The knowledge of the timeline to reach the top is mentioned as a key factor for employees choosing different options than staying at the company and working until reaching partner level.

A change in attitude regarding the interviewees interpretation of the timeline is exemplified when reaching the higher levels. Employee 5 says that *"it's too far away in the future for me to grasp"* and continues to explain in the interview that the motivation regarding the Partner role has dropped due to not having a clear image of when it is possible to reach the top of the career ladder, expresses a growing interest in keeping the current role. Similar thoughts are mentioned by employee 6 *"I think the next step for me will probably take four years maybe, but after that it might be five or more, I stopped counting when I reached ten years in the future."*. Indicating that the interviewees desire to move to the next position is only maintained when the next promotion is in the near future. Employee 1 and 4 exemplify an unclear picture for when it is possible to reach the role Partner:

> *I think you generally work somewhere between 12-15 years before you are promoted to Partner. But you also have to make a case for yourself in front of the other Partners and explain why you deserve to become a Partner, what projects you have withdrawn, how much you've charged. Then how much you contribute to the company and it's up to the other Partners to decide, so it's not very common. I do not know how often they bring in new Partners, but it is not super common.* (Employee 1)

> *I would say that you have probably worked at the company for 25 years or something, but you're not even sure that you will make it to a Partner because there are so many variables.* (Employee 4)

Employee 1 and 4 highlight the demanding time span to become a Partner but also the fact that you might not reach Partner level even if you have worked long and hard. The quotes clarify the large number of obstacles and indicate the difficulty for the employees to imagine the role, Partner. Employee 4 also mentions *"It's quite a few years that you have to go on and on. Working towards a promotion that you may not even get or at the end want."*. When the timespan is too long it seems to have a negative influence on the employee's motivation, the first steps of the career ladder happen at a more rapid pace but when it shifts from two years to five or above seem to lead to a declining enthusiasm. It implies that the interviewees view of the structure and influence stated during the first steps decreases the higher they get in the career ladder. Employee 2 mentions *"It's such an incredibly long road to hike and there are so many things that need to work, you need to have the time, energy, and drive to get you there. "*, indicating how the time span can have an immediate shift on the employees view on promotions and especially the role as Partner.

4.5.4 Taking another route

As previously stated, the desire for promotions influences the interviewees to reach the Partner level as quickly as possible. Instead of working hard at the current company, the interviewees mention that one route to the top of the career ladder is moving to another company, which they mentioned is linked to several rewards. A common perception highlighted by the interviews is that the employees at these companies are very attractive and are often given job offers. These offers often include a higher position at the new company as well as a large raise in salary. Employee 7 describes it as:

> *Because many of the employees are headhunted or apply for other companies, as it is a very strong job market, and it also happens that people are recruited to competitors on the promise that they will get the role of manager or higher if they change jobs.* (Employee 7)

Indicating that the desire for seeking promotions could have a negative effect for the company as the employees seek the fastest route to the top. Implying the need for a structure that influences the employee to stay and climb the career ladder within the company. Employee 10 also exemplifies the possibility to advance by changing employers.

> *One way to develop is to change business, as well as change competence areas. If you've been at the company for two years you get a lot of offers, often with much higher salary.* (Employee 10)

The interviewees perception of the ladder inclines them to potentially change companies to achieve their desires at a quicker pace, switching employers is interpreted as a way to be promoted to roles vertically higher up in the career ladder. Signaling problems and weaknesses with the structure of the career ladder if trying to obtain employees.

4.5.5 Overwhelming demands

In several of the interviews the employees started discussing other factors they desired such as spare time and personal matters. Several mentioned more disadvantages regarding the higher levels of the career ladder further into the interviews. Employee 9 described it as *"It is required that you prioritize and add the extra hours every day"* and Employee 10 as *"You need to be accessible all the time."*. The Partner role was often mentioned as difficult when trying to balance your time and prioritize things outside of work.

> *I can only say that I think that not everyone wants to become Partner, due to the demands and lack of leisure. It will be a completely different pressure, so it is not entirely uncommon for people to choose to stay in the role as manager or director.* (Employee 1)
>
> *I have trouble seeing myself as a parent and as a Partner, I don't think it would be possible to meet all the demands and requirements at the same time. If I'm happy at a manager level or director, I would probably consider staying there if I had kids.* (Employee 4)

The interviewees exemplify their interpretation of the negative aspects of Partner, which they mention differs from the other levels, they emphasize the difficulties with managing all other parts of life when being a Partner at the organizations. Employee 4 continues to argue that it would require too much and therefore only a few make it to the top of the ladder stating, "*Some have the time, energy and want that amount of work. But I wouldn't be able to do it while handling everything else in life.*" (Employee 4). Troubles understanding how the Partners manage to handle all the tasks are also mentioned by Employee 4 who describes *"I can't understand how our Partners manage it"* the employee emphasizes the feeling of the individuals having the role as Partner being unique. Another quote by Employee 4 highlighting that the desire might have decreased is that , "*There are not many who would be able to handle all that but still be so happy all the time"*.

It could be interpreted that the employee has a sense of uncertainty for the Partner role, the interviewee implies how the division's Partner seems to manage it but the employee doubts to be able to do it. Finding balance between work and leisure is mentioned by Employee 5 as something you learn later in the career, stating "*My career desires and goals changed after four to eight years in relation to the one's i had in the beginning*" when discussing how the employee prioritizes. It could be interpreted that the shared will between the interviewees to climb the career ladder and to reach Partner level disappears. The prestige previously emphasized by the interviewees seem to lose the appeal when they mention the demands the role includes. It implies that the climb up the career ladder could be viewed as a mountain and when an employee gets closer to the top the mountain becomes too steep.

4.5.6 Too afraid to commit

In the interviews, uncertainty for the Partner role emerged when discussing the demands the interviewees seem to rather distance themselves from the role as Partner. Employee 5 mentions in the interview when discussing vertical promotions to the top of the career ladder *"one size* *does not fit all"* which rather gives a feeling of evasion rather than the employee truly wanting to prioritize other matters.

> *It is very demanding with high expectations, you might feel that the requirements have been raised, but you may not really be able to meet these requirements. It can even be the case that the requirements at the previous level were difficult, so it can be a very stressful situation.* (Employee 10)
>
> *You need to be able to meet all expectations, if you don't, colleagues might lose trust, so there really aren't all pros with that promotion."* (Employee 7)

The high demands an individual faces when climbing tha last steps of the career ladder stated by employee 10 further implies that the interviewee has uncertainties in regard to promotions. It could be interpreted that the high demands hinder an upwards climb. Employee 7's statement indicates a worry for external thoughts to not be good enough for the next role in the career ladder and thus stops the upward advancement. It could be interpreted that the high expectations the interviewees perceive the roles at the top of the career ladder to have, creates a fear to continue climbing, thus leading employees to not want to take the next step due to the risks of negative effects. The desire for promotions has therefore vanished as a result and is replaced with a fear for it.

5. Discussion

In the analysis of our empirical findings, we have argued that the interviewed employees have a strong desire to climb up their organizational career ladders for several reasons. Climbing upwards, which is only made possible through promotions, is understood as a rewarding process that provides a sense of achievement and is also perceived as a measure of success. We have further argued that the position of Partner was idealized by the employees and that the position carried desirable prestige and opportunities. An organizational ethos is described where the employees are expected to continuously advance upwards the career ladder, which in turn further fuels their desire to, and expectation that they will, reach the top of the career ladder. Whereas superiors expect employees to do the right things and continue to hone their skills, employees expect that doing so will lead to a promotion and allows for conceptualizing how far away the promotion is. We have argued that the existing expectations on both sides combined with being collectively promoted in the initial phases does not point to a career ladder, but rather to our chosen metaphor of a career escalator where the initial climb is replaced by a ride. This perception changes drastically in the later phases and we argue that the employees perceive the ladder to rather turn into a steep mountain.

5.1 Normative control & Identity Regulation

Our findings confirm that climbing the career ladder and achieving the title of Partner speaks to employees' aspirations and provides a basis for identifying with the organization in different ways. When employees spoke about the career ladder, they described the climb as *"fun"* in the sense that it is *"an acknowledgement you receive for what you have done"*. The fact that employees see promotions as "*an acknowledgement [...] for what you have done*" indicates that employees strive to perform and are continuously promoted to the next step in order to recognise and demonstrate that they have done something good. We consider that this shows, drawing on Rennstam's (2017) assertion, that they think and act in a desirable way without either having been directly told what to do or that their performance needs to be measured. In other words, their actions have been shaped in a way that, in line with Rennstam's statement, favors organizational effectiveness. With this statement, we argue that organizations benefit from employees being continuously promoted and advancing to the top of the career ladder since a prerequisite for promotion is that *"adequate work is produced"*.

Although employees are not directly told what to do, we insist that there is an unspoken clear code of what is considered correct behavior and that employees have a clear picture of what it means to actually 'do a good job', which was mentioned by many as a requirement for a promotion to the next step. We believe that the organization has established and clarified such a clear set of ground rules about the 'natural' way of doing things in a given context that employees are guided in what is natural or necessary for the company's work to function (Rennstam, 2017). We likewise argue, drawing on Rennstam (2017), that employees do not in any way question or deviate from 'this right way', indicating that the organizations have succeeded in creating a collective sense of identity and purpose.

Our argument that a clear set of ground rules, about the 'natural' way of doing things, has been established is reinforced by the fact that employees are aware of how far away the next promotion is. We argue that this further points to the fact that the set rules of the game guide and direct the employees to do what is natural or necessary for the company's work to function and that this is done without them having to be told what to do. The absence of the need to directly tell the employees what to do can be explained by the fact that instead of giving orders, the organizations entice employees to 'do the right thing' with the promise of promotion. We would argue that the organizations therefore want and expect employees to have a desire to climb the career ladder and for this reason they will follow these set rules of the game.

This explicitly stated desire, on the part of management, for employees to climb was presented in the analysis of our empirical findings. Employees expressed that *"the organization wants you to take the next step"* which reinforces the management's desire, in one way or another, the control succeeds and is imprinted in the employees' minds. We argue that this demonstrates that through management-initiated attempts, organizations have managed to, what Rennstam (2017) emphasized, control employees' self-esteem.

Our stated argument is further reinforced by the fact that several employees themselves express a desire to climb to the top of the organization's career ladder, which goes in line with the organization's values regarding the creation of a career ladder. We therefore argue that it can be interpreted that employees consider their self-image to be in line with the organization's values. When organizational members' self-image goes hand in hand with the organizations' values, we argue, as Rennstam (2017) does, that the normative control method, identity regulation, has been practiced as that method involves getting employees to perceive that their self-image is consistent with the organization's values (Kärreman & Rylander, 2008).

Since the perceived self-image of someone aspiring to career climb is collective, we argue that organizations are looking to identify that particular self-image during the recruitment process. In other words, we argue that the organizations identify candidates who not only have the right qualifications but also the right characteristics such as personality, values, norms, attitudes, and goals that match those of the organization. This then demonstrates that, according to Kärreman and Rennstam (2019), the commonly used recruitment model, the matching model, is used by the organizations when hiring new employees. In line with this, we argue that organizations try to identify candidates who accept the realistic picture of what it is like to work in the organization, which is portrayed in terms of hard work and expectations of advancement. Therefore, we further argue that those employed by these organizations accept this type of working environment and share the values, norms and goals that match those of the organization.

Another method of normative control that we argue is exercised in the organizations is socialization as many employees stressed the importance of education and *"constantly keeping up to date, researching what's going on and learning what might be good to know in terms of technical tools, regulations and similar"*. This indicates that the organizations want to introduce its norms which, according to Kärreman & Rennstam (2019), is done both in the form of induction courses or continuing education, but also done during normal working hours through everyday interactions with other employees. We therefore argue that, although employees appreciate and value learning new things in their work, this indicates that their thoughts, feelings and underlying values are being guided.

Employees' perceptions that the organizations are at the cutting edge, where employees get to *"see and shape the corporate society rather than being reactive and responding to the change that is happening"* and be *"the usp at the cutting edge [and] drive that change"* can also be seen as an exercise of normative control. The arguments we make for this are that organizations construct the whole company and its employees as elites where organizations are seen as leading companies that are ahead of the rest of the competitors in terms of direction and capability (Rennstam, 2017). In this way, the identity of employees is influenced, regulated and transformed to be identified with being at the cutting edge.

5.2 Aspirational control

The interviewed employees proclaimed in various ways what achieving partnership would mean and include for them in their careers. While understood as a tough climb to make, the desire and aspiration to one day reach this ultimate symbol of success which lies at the top of the career ladder, is evident in comments such as it being the *ultimate prestige* and something *magical*. Although the employees who articulated their desire to reach the top were at different levels of the career ladder, they could still conceptualize their careers within the respective career ladders as a journey towards partnership. We argue that the organizational career ladder itself further facilitates a desire to reach the idealized position which is in line with Alvesson and Kärreman's (2007) claim that clear career paths can link an employee's identity to a particular career. Thus, an employee who for instance carries certain traits or identifies with what the Partner position entails or provides, can link their sense of self with this particular position (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007), therefore compelling the employee to push towards reaching this position. Costas and Kärreman (2013) describe this as the employee's aspirations and orientations becoming regulated in relation to the expected career path. Thus, we argue that the career ladder exerts aspirational control through tying the employee's identity with the idealized position of Partner.

Yet another form of aspirational control takes shape in what we identified as the career escalator, a metaphor for how expectations from both employees and superiors related to taking the next step in the career ladder, combined with the collective promotions at initial levels, replace the climb with a ride. The career escalator becomes especially interesting in relation to the already established aspirational control which the career ladder exerts over the employees who idealize the position of Partner. Since the career ladder was considered to provide a clear picture of what would await on the employee's future climb, and designed to continuously push the employees to the next step, the aspirations and orientations related to the expectancy of the career path (Costas & Kärreman, 2013), can be understood to be further solidified. We argue that for employees whose identity has become coupled with the idealized Partner position, the career escalator intensifies the experience and expectation of how the career path proceeds (Costas & Kärreman, 2013). This means that employees, during their initial years when the career escalator is present, will perceive that their climb, or more accurately their journey, towards the idealized position is definetely proceeding smoothly forward, which we argue will further strengthen the identity associated with the expected and desired position. Also, by more or less considering to know how far away a promotion is and aiming to do *everything correctly* and *what you are expected to*, employees can feel confident that they certainly will continue to move forward on their journey to the idealized position. Hence, it is our reasoning that the career escalator will create an environment initially where the employee will assume to continue forward indefinitely, thus making the perceived climb (or ride) towards the idealized position appear to be closer and smoother than it perhaps is.

5.3 The mountain

Much of our empirical analysis shows that the career ladder itself facilitates the desire to reach the idealized position, Partner, and that it ties an employee's identity to a particular career (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). However, we intend to argue that it has been identified that, although employees identify with what the Partner position entails or provides, and thus link their self-esteem to this particular position (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007), the aspiration for this position wanes when the plateau, which we refer to as, the Mountain, is reached. That employees see the Partner role as unattainable because "*the demands are much higher"* and that one must *“make yourself available at all times”* indicates that the clear aspiration to reach the role is not as strong. We argue that the ground rules, set and clarified by the organizations about the 'natural' way of doing things in a given context, which are meant to guide the employees in what is natural or necessary for the business to work (Rennstam, 2017), cease to exist for the higher levels. We consider that the employees can no longer comprehend what is required to achieve the idealized role of Partner, which we argue suggests that the clear structure that clarifies the requirements for the employees at the lower levels has ceased to exist for the higher levels. A result is that the previous argument we made, regarding the employees having a natural or necessary understanding for the company's work, which functioned without needing direct control can no longer be explained by organizations enticing them with the promise of a promotion because the next promotion seems unattainable anyway.

The fact that the organizations want and expect employees to desire advancements throughout the career ladder, makes it arguable that the set rules of the game loses effect when the idealized Partner position is perceived unreachable, due to the set rules of the game no longer attaching the employees identities to the idealized position of Partner. In addition to the reasons that the Partner role feels unattainable due to the hard-to-identify requirements, we also argue that the prestige has lost its appeal which has likewise resulted in many choosing to change firms to achieve their desires at a faster pace.

We claim that it explains why the career ladder, and more specifically the role of Partner, loses the employees initial aspiration. When employees reach the mountain (a plateau) , it can no longer be considered that the career ladder exerts aspirational control, since it is not tying the employee's identity to the idealized position of Partner anymore. We therefore claim that aspirational control, a form of identity regulation, cannot efficiently steer the employees desire and aspiration to push all the way to Partner level. We therefore underscore that this form of normative control ceases to work.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Practical and theoretical implications

The thesis practical relevance lies in the provided clarity for companies that seek to better understand how employees within PSF’s perceive their climb of the career ladder through advancing forward through promotions. The study also provides a comprehension of the advantages and disadvantages that the career ladder can create. More specifically the advantages being an initial increase in desire to advance within the organization due to the clarity the career ladder can provide, but also potential disadvantages that can result if roles are perceived as unreachable and thus leading to employees potentially seeking jobs at other companies.

The study has contributed theoretically by having clarified how the career ladder could function as a system of aspirational control and therefore explained current gaps in normative and aspirational control, providing a clear indication for the need for future research and developments within these areas. Furthermore, the study clarified how forms of normative control are present in the career ladder. More specifically, how HRM systems can be channels for control when exercising it together with a career ladder, also including incentive control in relation to the principal-agent relationship, as well as the use of identity regulation through specific design of the career ladder.

6.2 Suggestions for further research

The observation that surprisingly little has been covered in previous research and literature in relation to organizational control practices and career ladders in PSF, indicates that there are vast possibilities to conduct research in this particular field. One of these includes expanding the scope of this study´s result by aiming to identify further how the career ladder exerts aspirational control, or other forms of control, through career ladders in PSF. It would also be interesting to further investigate how career ladders can exert forms of control in other organizations than PSF as well. Additionally, it would have been interesting to examine the data based on a different theoretical frame of reference because we can see that the organization's career ladder exerts elements of other forms of control.

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